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Stigma and blame related to COVID-19 pandemic: A case-study of editorial cartoons in Canada

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic represents not only the spread of a highly contagious and potentially fatal virus, but also an outbreak of theories, rumors, discourses and representations trying to make sense of a crisis. In this article, we explore the issue of blame and stigma in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. We do so by studying editorial cartoons published about COVID-19 in ten mainstream Canadian newspapers between January 2020 and March 2021. We identified 203 editorial cartoons that highlight common discourses which blame or stigmatize specific groups of people for the origin or transmission of COVID-19, or for their behavior during the pandemic. The cartoons focused on four groups: 1) people of Chinese origin or descent and of other national/geographic provenance (Americans, Canadians from specific provinces, urban residents); 2) international travelers; 3) people who do not respect the preventive measures to contain the pandemic; and 4) people who question or criticize the scientific discourses about COVID-19. Our analysis revealed an "othering process" common in times of pandemic. Our analysis of editorial cartoons in Canada also uncovered a moralization around the respect of the counter measures against COVID-19. These editorial cartoons largely divide the population into two groups: 1) "virtuous" people who are "selfless" and "smart" and who respect the public health preventive measures; 2) those who are "immoral", "self-centered", "silly" and even "stupid", who do not respect the recommended measures to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. While negatively portraying these individuals may help promote adherence to the recommended measures, it also can exacerbate polarization. Analyzing editorial cartoons can be a useful approach to rapidly gather information on attitudes and feelings in the public at a specific time and place.

1. Introduction

On December 31, 2019, the first case of what would later be known

as SARS-CoV-2, the virus at the origin of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was detected in the city of Wuhan, China. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a

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pandemic. By January 10, 2022, more than 305 million people had been infected with COVID-19 worldwide, leading to more than 5.4 million deaths (WHO, 2021). The containment measures put in place to curb the spread of the virus (i.e., closure of schools, businesses and services, curfews, travel bans, etc.) have affected human activities around the world. This is an unprecedented crisis in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world.

The COVID-19 pandemic represents not only the spread of a highly contagious and potentially fatal virus, it is also what Treichler (1987) called an “epidemic of signification”; a widespread outbreak of theories, rumors, discourses and representations trying to make sense of a crisis. In this epidemic of signification, discourses that blame and stigmatize abound. At the global level, several groups, including people of Chinese or Asian descent, travelers, youth, and health workers, have either been accused of being at the origin of the virus and/or blamed for its transmission. For example, Croucher et al. (2020) noted increased stigma, discrimination, and racism towards individuals of Asian descent since the onset of the pandemic; findings of their survey conducted in the United States showed that social media use can increase prejudice or hate toward Asians Americans. This, of course, is not limited to the United States (Barreneche, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021).

The search for scapegoats in times of pandemic is not new and has been observed for numerous diseases in different times and places (e.g., Farmer, 1992). The identification of culprits in the face of epidemic diseases, as many researchers have noted, also commonly reflects pre-existing conceptions of illness and contagion as well as social, cultural, political and historical dynamics of othering and exclusion (e.g., Atlani-Duault et al., 2015). Individual and group's responses to public health crisis—and attribution of blame for diseases—need to be understood in the broader socio-cultural, historical, and political landscapes that “gives shape to ideas and ideals” about health, prevention and what a good citizen is and does (Kaufman, 2010, p.8). Based on their ethnographic work conducted in the first months of the pandemic in the United States, Koon et al. (2021, p.1) argued that “COVID-19 [...] is as much a social pandemic as a biological one”. Even within “culturally homogenous communities”, they noted, conflicting value structures and risk perceptions can impact collective actions. These authors have shown that some symbols of the pandemic have been increasingly politicized and have acquired different meanings for different Americans based on pre-existing worldviews and deep-seated beliefs about—referring to Kleinman's work—“*what really matters* to people under conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity” (Kleinman 1988 in Kenworthy et al., 2021, p.1435).

If certain individuals and groups are accused of being the cause of epidemic diseases or held responsible for their transmission—in other words, blamed for them—, others suffer the additional harm of being stigmatized or discredited because of them. As Aggleton and al. (2005, p.7) wrote, stigmatization is a “dynamic process of devaluation that significantly discredits an individual in the eyes of others.” In this context, health-stigma occurs when a person who has or is assumed to have a specific health condition, who adheres to certain health beliefs or who adopts specific health-related behavior is devalued, linked to undesirable characteristics and shunned for these reasons.

Blaming and stigmatizing discourses have impacts in real life: on the self-esteem and mental well-being of the concerned individuals and communities, on their access to health care, on their social relationships with others, and on their life chances more generally (education, occupation, income, etc.). The adverse effects of stigma are such that it is increasingly considered as an independent social determinant of health (Goldberg, 2017; Link and Hatzenbuehler, 2016). Some researchers go further and consider stigma as a fundamental cause of disease (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013).

In this article, we explore these issues by studying editorial cartoons published about COVID-19 in ten Canadian newspapers between January 2020 and March 2021. Editorial cartoons, also called political or newspaper cartoons, are a fundamental part of the media landscape in

most countries. Through humor, cartoonists provide a perspective on timely topics that have already been established in the mainstream media as worthy of public attention (Greenberg, 2002). As a form of visual news discourses, editorial cartoons can be considered a barometer of public opinion (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). In their mission to inform and entertain, cartoonists “shape the form and content of their accounts with a particular understanding about who their readers are and what they will find interesting, informative and humorous” (Greenberg, 2002, p.196). Editorial cartoons also reflect cultural attitudes and values of a society at a particular historical time, thus making them a preferred object for sociological research (Gamson and Stuart, 1992; Giarelli and Tulman, 2003). Through mockery, editorial cartoons can point out absurdity, challenge the status quo and be a force of social and political change. However, they can also strengthen and perpetuate dominant social ideas and perspectives. As illustrated by Gamson and Modigliani in their work on nuclear power (1989), the influence of media discourses—and cartoons—on public opinion is a complex and two-way process in which media discourses both shape and are influenced by public opinion.

Although cartoonists reacted quickly to the new coronavirus, leading to an explosion of editorial cartoons about COVID-19 and its impacts on people and society, few scholars have analyzed this work so far. Among published studies, most analyzed a small number of editorial cartoons (fewer than 10) (for notable exceptions see Filardo-Llamas, 2021; Joubert and Wasserman, 2020; Kazanovsky, 2020), or the drawings of specific cartoonists (Rutherford, 2020) or specific newspapers (Alkhresh, 2020), and sought to understand how cartoonists have chosen, in different countries (Britain, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa, etc.), to visually depict the COVID-19 pandemic, the main subjects they portrayed, the types of visual techniques/strategies or rhetoric devices/tools they used (e.g., metaphors) and the emotional tone of their drawings (Aazam et al., 2020; Nicholls, 2020; Sattar et al., 2020; Tunde and Bello, 2021). Most studies drew from the fields of semiotic, communication or visual analysis. To our knowledge, no study has been conducted from an anthropological perspective or with a focus on the issue of blame and stigma.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, social science analysis of editorial cartoons on health have focused on infectious diseases such as HIV (Obonyo, 2011; Wigston, 2002) and Ebola (Nwabueze et al., 2017). These studies have shown that the use of symbols and metaphors by cartoonists (e.g. the Reaper) is common to illustrate the inevitability of infectious diseases and the fear they instill in the population (Wigston, 2002). These analyses have also highlighted that while the desire of health authorities to control the transmission of infectious diseases is rarely questioned by cartoonists, they often underline and criticize the discrepancy between the actions taken by governments and diseases' severity (Obonyo, 2011).

In the first part of this article, we summarize key features of the social sciences literature on health, blame, stigma, and COVID-19. Our methodological approach is described in the second section. The last section presents our analysis of editorial cartoons as they portray blame and stigma in the context of COVID-19. In addition to the traditional scapegoats usually identified in the context of epidemic diseases, notably foreigners, travelers and urban dwellers, we will show that a new category of people is being blamed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: the “immoral”, “silly” and “egocentric” people who do not adhere to the recommended preventive measures to counter the transmission of COVID-19.

2. Conceptual background: health, blame, stigma, and COVID-19

Sociology and anthropology have a long history of interest in blame and stigma. In *Risk and Blame* (1992), Douglas writes that blame, or the designation of responsibility for causing social problems, is directly linked to definitions of danger. According to the author, “[d]anger is

defined to protect the public good and the incidence of blame is a by-product of arrangements for fellow members to contribute to it" (1992, p.6). In other words, blame has a social integrative function; to avoid finger pointing and criticism, the community is exhorted to obey the rules. Douglas identifies different patterns of blame attribution. One is the adversarial in which blame is cast on outside enemies or rivals, on out-group persons. Another is the moralistic pattern in which the vulnerable, the victimized, the outcasted people from the group are blamed and their moral standards and competence lampooned. As Douglas notes, the role of blame is to make and enforce community consensus. Whether in the form of criticism, gossip, ridicule or public shaming, blame is "a way of asserting the boundary between morally acceptable action and deviant behavior, and thus helps to solidify consensus and to control dissent" (Besnier, 2009, p.16) and hence, to build and enforce social control. The blaming process, and the definitions of risk and danger on which it is based, is therefore profoundly politicized and linked to dominant ideologies. It also varies historically and culturally (on the relevance of Douglas' analyses to understand blame in contemporary contexts, see notably Eriksen, 2014).

Stigma is also a critical concept in sociology and anthropology. Since the celebrated work of Goffman (1963), a profusion of research has attempted to analyze its forms, its logics and its consequences. According to one of the most used definitions of stigma in academic research:

[...] stigma exists when the following interrelated components converge. In the first component, people distinguish and label human differences. In the second, dominant cultural beliefs link labeled persons to undesirable characteristics—to negative stereotypes. In the third, labeled persons are placed in distinct categories so as to accomplish some degree of separation of "us" from "them." In the fourth, labeled persons experience status loss and discrimination that lead to unequal outcomes. Finally, stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination (Link and Phelan, 2001, p.367).

The "core criteria" or the "essence of stigma" (Goldberg, 2017, p.303) is thus "difference" and "deviance." Stigma exists when a difference is deemed socially and culturally significant and identified as such, and when people affected by that difference are assigned a set of undesirable characteristics that form negative stereotypes. But as Link and Phelan (2001) write and several social scientists argue (e.g., Castro and Farmer, 2005; Parker and Aggleton, 2003), stigma is intrinsically linked to domination and power. "[...] [I]t takes power to stigmatize" (Link and Phelan, 2001, p.375). Stigma is also intrinsically linked to social inequalities and exclusion. "[...] [S]tigma feeds upon, strengthens and reproduces existing inequalities of class, race, gender, and sexuality" (Parker and Aggleton, 2003, p.13). As some researchers have pointed out, stigma is also a moral experience where a stigmatized condition "threatens [...] what is most at stake for actors in a local social world" (Yang et al., 2007, p.1524). This includes cultural meanings, affective states, roles, ways of being, values, etc. that people hold dear. Stigma therefore varies from culture to culture and an interpretative lens is necessary to understand the experience of those who are stigmatized as well as those who stigmatize.

Research has shown that stigma is common across health conditions. However, some illnesses have a higher potential for stigmatization than others. This is notably the case of illnesses that are positioned as the responsibility of the individual, associated with morally sanctionable or deviant behavior, perceived as contagious and threatening to the community, associated with undesirable and unaesthetic form of death and symptoms, and not well understood by the population and/or view negatively by health care providers (Alonzo & Reynold, 1995, p.305; see

also Katz, 1979). The fact that COVID-19 is a highly contagious and potentially fatal virus, for which we have limited knowledge, that has profoundly disrupted the lives of individuals and communities worldwide, for which the main hope for control is a high rate of immunization and adherence to strict preventive measures makes COVID-19 an obvious candidate for stigma (see Roelen et al., 2020).

3. Methods

We collected editorial cartoons related to COVID-19 published from January 1, 2020, to March 31, 2021, on the websites of ten regionally- and politically-diverse mainstream Canadian newspapers (*The Vancouver Sun*, *The Victoria Times Colonist* [British Columbia], *The Toronto Star*, *The Toronto Sun* [Ontario], *The Chronicle Herald* [Nova Scotia], *Le Devoir*, *Le Journal de Québec*, *La Presse* [Quebec], *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post* [national English-language newspapers]). A research assistant was responsible for collecting the editorial cartoons in each province. Data collection was done on a daily or weekly basis, depending on the frequency of publication of editorial cartoons and their availability on the newspapers' websites. Of the ten newspapers selected, only the *National Post* and the *Vancouver Sun* did not have a specific section for editorial cartoons on their websites. The *Newspapers.com* archive was consulted to obtain the editorial cartoons from these two newspapers, which were collected retrospectively due to delays in archive availability.

The content of all editorial cartoons published in the ten newspapers during this period was first screened and those related to COVID-19—a total of 1564 cartoons—were included in our sample. The selected editorial cartoons were coded thematically in NVivo 13 using a deductive coding scheme inspired by the taxonomy used by the World Health Organization's Information Network for Epidemics (WHO-EPIWIN) ("cause", "illness", "treatment", "interventions", "information", etc.) (Purnat et al., 2021). Since the pandemic evolved over time, new themes were identified inductively from the cartoons being coded and were added to the coding scheme.

Second, in line with our aim of identifying blame and stigma, we also examined each of the 1564 editorial cartoons with the following research questions: 1) Do the editorial cartoons portray some people or groups as being at fault for COVID-19 pandemic? 2) Do the editorial cartoons depict some people or groups as particularly likely to get infected by COVID-19 and to transmit it? 3) Do the editorial cartoons portray some people or groups as being responsible for the spread of COVID-19? 4) Do the editorial cartoons criticize (or valorize) some people or groups within the general population for their behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic? Guided by these research questions, we identified 203 editorial cartoons in our sample that blame or stigmatize specific groups or people for the origin or the transmission of the COVID-19, or for their behavior during the pandemic. These 203 cartoons were saved as PDF files and were uploaded in a separate NVivo 13 project for analysis. A thematic content analysis was conducted based on four dimensions: 1) main character (i.e., groups or people portrayed); 2) key message (i.e., situation or characteristic depicted); 3) context (i.e., time and location) and 4) prevention of COVID-19 (i.e., link with recommended preventive measures, if any). In an inductive manner, conceptual categories were created and concepts belonging to a similar dimension were grouped. These conceptual categories were updated and revised until no new properties, dimensions or relationships emerged during the analysis. The coding scheme was discussed and validated by the team of researchers. Independent, dual coding of a subset of the data was performed to assess inter-coder reliability. The discrepancies were resolved by discussion, and the coding scheme adjusted. Our analysis allowed us to better understand the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada, and specific groups perceived to be at the origin of virus or considered responsible for its transmission, from the perspectives of mainstream media ("emic view"), while bringing the concepts of stigma and blame as theoretical lens to the study ("etic view").

4. Results

Four main groups of people were identified in cartoons as having a role in the outbreak and spread of COVID-19: 1) people of Chinese origin or descent and of other national/geographic provenance (Americans, Canadians from specific provinces, resident of cities) ($n = 61$); 2) international travelers ($n = 33$); 3) people who did not respect the preventive measures to contain the pandemic ($n = 53$); and 4) people who questioned or criticized the scientific discourses about COVID-19 ($n = 53$). Specific age groups ($n = 9$) and people who abused government financial supports ($n = 8$) were also blamed in a small number of editorial cartoons. However, these were few, so we focused on the four major categories of blame and stigma (national/geographic others, travelers, refusers of preventive measures, and science deniers) for this analysis.

4.1. Blaming and stigmatizing national and geographic others

Ascribing blame to foreigners and outsiders is a common feature in epidemic contexts. Historically, immigrants were often accused of being at fault for emergent diseases. For example, in the 19th century United States, Irish Catholic immigrants were typically held responsible for cholera, Jewish immigrants were blamed for tuberculosis, Irish and German newcomers were accused of being responsible for yellow fever and Italian immigrants for polio (Gover et al., 2020). In a contemporary context, the advent of HIV has alternatively been imputed to Haitians in the United States (Farmer, 1992), to “white people” in several African countries (Schoepf, 1995), to migrants and international workers from East Asian countries (Thailand, Korea, Taiwan, China) and Indonesia in Japan (Buckley, 1997) and Papua (Butt, 2008), and to residents of cities in Burkina Faso (Cros, 2005) and New Caledonia (Salomon-Nékiriaï, 1997). All these blaming dynamics are at work in the context of COVID-19. Among our sample of 203 editorial cartoons, 61 depicted blame and stigma based on national or geographic origin.

The scapegoating of people of Chinese origin and descent has been a prominent factor from the outset of the pandemic. Because the new coronavirus was first recorded in China, people from China or of Chinese ethnicity were at first considered suspicious if not dangerous (Barreneche, 2020). Traditional Chinese culinary habits, notably the consumption of wild animals sold in “wet markets”, judged by many Westerners as “unhealthy” and “primitive”, have been the target of criticisms and suspected of being at the origin of the pandemic, leading, among other things, to the avoidance of Chinese and other Asian restaurants in several countries, including Canada. Editorial cartoons about COVID-19 in Canada reflected this stigma and blame experienced by people of Chinese origin and ancestry. In our sample, 21 cartoons, mostly published during the first months of the crisis (January 2020–May 2020), linked China and Chinese people to the origin and spread of COVID-19. These editorial cartoons commonly depicted the President of China, Xi Jinping, or emblems of the country, such as the panda or the dragon, coughing, wearing masks or being surrounded by

coronaviruses to illustrate the role of China in the outbreak and transmission of COVID-19. Some cartoons contained the caption “Wuhan”, hence directly associating the pandemic and the disruption it has caused to the world (e.g., on the economy, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/gallery-editorial-cartoons-for-january-2020/>, see the second cartoon) to the place where the SARS-CoV-2 was first discovered. Editorial cartoons also commonly portrayed products typical of China in the mind of most Canadians, mainly food. An editorial cartoon published on January 26, 2020, in the *Journal de Québec* and presented in Fig. 1a provides a good illustration. The cartoon titled “Chinese cookie ...” (“Biscuit chinois ...” in French) showed a fortune cookie inside of which is a mask instead of the usual aphorism or prophecy, insinuating the “fortune” China brought to the world in 2020 was a health crisis. The blaming of China for the pandemic is even clearer in an editorial cartoon published in the *Toronto Star* on December 7, 2020 (Fig. 1b). This editorial cartoon showed Santa Claus in his sleigh dumping lumps of coal on China—the gift that only “naughty” children receive in their stockings—on Christmas Night, showing that, even many months after the beginning of the pandemic, China was still being held accountable for the outbreak of COVID-19 and for the challenging year that 2020 had been for the population worldwide.

Americans were criticized and denounced as “foreign” threats in nine (9) editorial cartoons that portrayed people from the United States as particularly at risk of being infected by and, hence, of transmitting COVID-19. These editorial cartoons were principally published during summer 2020, highlighting summer vacations when Americans commonly cross the border to vacation in Canada, and vice versa. Instances of American travelers violating Canadian public health measures were in the news during this time period. Although Canada had officially closed its border to foreign nationals on March 18, 2020, some Americans still entered the country through policy loopholes. In summer 2020, while the epidemiological situation in Canada was improving, the United States also experienced a sharp increase in COVID-19 cases, becoming the country with the highest rate per capita in the world (Oxford Martin School, 2021). Editorial cartoons illustrated this fear and othering of potentially-diseased Americans. One cartoon published in early summer in the *Toronto Star*, for example, showed the Statue of Liberty in a snow globe being slowly submerged by coronaviruses (https://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorial_cartoon/2020/06/29/michael-de-adder-covid-storm.html), while another one published in the *Toronto Sun* at the end of the summer depicted a beaver, the iconic animal of Canada, looking over a fence representing the US-Canada border and realizing the “disaster” in its neighboring country (<https://torontosun.com/opinion/cartoons/sept-21-2020>). Americans were thus viewed as a threat to Canadians and to the improving COVID-19 situation in Canada and many editorial cartoons, such as the cartoon titled “Anxiety at the border” presented in Fig. 2, poked fun at Canadians wishing to prevent Americans from entering the country.

However, the risk of COVID-19 was not believed to come only from outside of the country but also from within, and people from some specific regions were viewed as more at risk than others. Canada is made

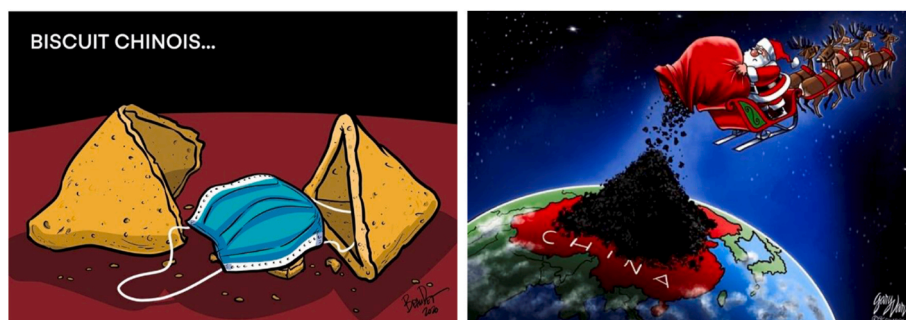


Fig. 1. a) Marc Beaudet, *Le Journal de Québec*, January 26, 2020. b) Gary Varvel, *The Toronto Sun*, December 17, 2020.



Fig. 2. Adrian Raeside, 2020, “Anxiety at the border”, *The Times Colonist*, July 16, 2020, ©raesidecartoon.com.

of ten provinces and three territories, all of which have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic albeit very differently. The provinces of Alberta and Quebec were the most severely impacted during our study period: Alberta being the province with the highest number of cases (6192 per 100,000 inhabitants) and Quebec being the province that has suffered the highest number of deaths (11,313, or 132 per 100,000 inhabitants) (Government of Canada, 2021). Conversely, during our study period, the Atlantic provinces (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador) were largely spared (between 160 and 639 cases per 100,000 inhabitants), partly because of their relative isolation and lesser population density but also because of the significant travel restrictions that were put in place in these provinces during the pandemic as part of an approach aimed at suppressing transmission rather than mitigating the impact of the virus. Thirteen (13) editorial cartoons ascribing blame in our sample belonged in this category. Several of these cartoons depicted the Atlantic provinces under a protective glass globe or bubble against the threat of the other provinces (e. g., <https://www.saltwire.com/nova-scotia/opinion/editorial-cartoon/s/bruce-mackinnon-cartoon-june-26-2020-466524/>). About half of these cartoons were published during the summer, the Atlantic provinces being popular holiday destinations for Canadians living to the east of Atlantic Canada. The editorial cartoon published in *The Globe and Mail* and presented in Fig. 3a shows that Canadian tourists were not welcome during the summer 2020 in these provinces however, in contrast to usual practice. This editorial cartoon refers to a well-known Canadian literary and television work set on Prince Edward Island, *Anne of Green Gables*. Anne, the main character, is drawn looking enraged and holding a pitchfork, with cars with plates marked “NB” for New Brunswick and “QC” for Quebec burning in the background. The caption, “Visit P.E.I. ...



At your own risk”, reinforces the image that visitors were not welcome in Prince Edward Island anymore. One editorial cartoon published in the *Toronto Star* (Fig. 3b) illustrated the blame game that took place in Canada between the provinces in early 2021 regarding their role in the spread of the COVID-19. This cartoon showed the map of four countries described as “Pandemic success stories.” While the success of Australia, New Zealand and Iceland had been attributed to their being islands with strict entry control, thus containing importation and spread of COVID-19 and limiting the impact of the new coronavirus on the lives of their citizens, the success of the Canadian provinces, as the caption indicates, was to have “successfully put all the blame entirely on each other.”

Finally, another group of people singled out for their responsibility in the spread of COVID-19 based on their geographic origin were city dwellers. In the same way that Canadian provinces and territories were impacted differently by COVID-19, cities and rural areas had different experiences of the pandemic too. In the province of Quebec, for example, the city of Montreal accounted, by January 10, 2022, for more than 30% of the cumulative COVID-19 cases recorded in the entire province, which corresponded to a rate of 11,722 cases per 100,000 inhabitants (Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2021). In Ontario, the regions of Peel, York and Durham, densely populated areas of the Greater Toronto Area, had particularly high numbers of cases of COVID-19 and rates of cases per 100,000 inhabitants (1282 cases, 1419 cases and 1230 cases per 100,000 inhabitants for Peel, York and Durham respectively) (Public Health Ontario, 2021). This contributed to the perception in the population that COVID-19 was a disease prevalent mainly in cities and transmitted by people from cities. Hence, 17 editorial cartoons in our sample illustrated this link between COVID-19 and urban regions and their residents. These editorial cartoons were mainly published in Quebec newspapers and represented people from Montreal, the biggest city in the province, as a threat to the population of the entire province. This was well illustrated in the editorial cartoon published in the *Journal du Québec* on May 13, 2020, and presented in Fig. 4. This cartoon depicted a resident of the countryside, as shown by his clothes and by the animals that surround him, in the process of building a brick wall to prevent people from the city, here Montreal, from going out. The caption in French, which can be translated as “We like you. But stay home!”, highlighted the desire of people from rural areas to distance themselves from people from cities and the responsibility they attributed to them for the spread of COVID-19, as well as it mirrors the wall-building discourse about American visitors.

4.2. Blaming and stigmatizing travelers

Travelers have also been blamed from the beginning of the pandemic for their role in the transmission of COVID-19 across the world. Bhat-tacharya et al. (2020) write, for example, that several individuals in India hide their travel history and did not report their symptoms of COVID-19 for fear of facing social exclusion and discrimination. In

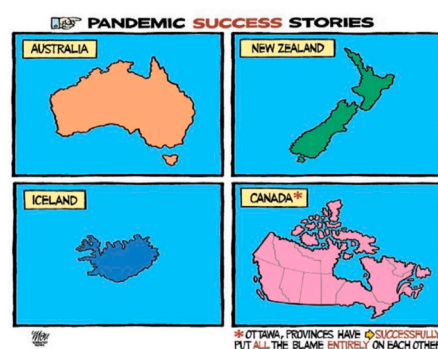


Fig. 3. a) David Parkins, *The Globe and Mail*, June 2020. b) Theo Moudakis, “Pandemic success”, *The Toronto Star*, February 25, 2021.



Fig. 4. Yannick Lemay, *Le Journal de Québec*, May 13, 2020.

Ghana, Adom et al. (2021) showed that Ghanaians who returned from foreign countries and their families were discriminated against by those who feared that they may infect them, and that their houses were labeled as “COVID-19 infectious houses.” Barreneche noted that in some Latin American countries such as Uruguay and Argentina, it was the rich (“the posh” or “los chetos”, in the degrading local slang terminology) who were blamed for the COVID-19 because “they are the one who can afford travelling to places where the virus is spread and, as a result, import the virus into their own countries on their return” (Barreneche, 2020, p.21).

International travelers have also been singled out for their role in the spread of the pandemic virus in Canada. In our sample of editorial cartoons, 33 held travelers accountable for the surging of COVID-19 cases in the country. Approximately one third of these editorial cartoons were published during the first months of the health crisis (January to March 2020) and depicted the repatriation by the Federal government of Canadians living overseas, the return of the “snowbirds” (Canadians, usually older, who spend the winters in warmer southern countries), and the fear that these returnees sparked the beginning of the pandemic. The rest of the editorial cartoons represented other times of the year when Canadians frequently travel outside of the country such as the summer vacations, the end of the year holidays and the beginning of the cold season. The association of travelers with COVID-19 was depicted by different means, notably showing coronaviruses in the cartoons. The editorial cartoon published in *The Chronicle Herald* on January 14, 2021, and presented in Fig. 5a, for example, showed a tourist arriving at Canadian customs after an international trip. While the customs officer asked if he had anything to declare, the tourist looked at his suitcase full of coronavirus. In other editorial cartoons, travelers were represented in virus-like forms, clearly insinuating that travelers were responsible for bringing COVID-19 into the country.



Potentially bringing COVID-19 into the country and transmitting the infection to others was not the only reproach made to travelers, however. Public sentiment was strongly against individuals who ignored travel restrictions and took vacations to warmer climates in the middle of winter. Travelers were accused of not showing the solidarity needed in times of crisis by leaving the country to enjoy the heat and the sun while the rest of the population endured the cold winter with public health restrictions and privations. At this time in Canada several provinces were in lock-down. In several editorial cartoons, travelers were depicted as self-centered and entitled. For example, an editorial cartoon published in *The Chronicle Herald* showed a man wearing a “snowbird” tank top and a Canada flag hat sitting comfortably in a swimming pool with a drink in his hand protesting against the restrictions imposed on travelers which, in his views, impinged upon his rights and needs (<http://www.saltwire.com/nova-scotia/opinion/bruce-mackinnon-cartoon-feb-3-2021-548133/>). An editorial cartoon published in *The Victoria Time Colonist* (Fig. 5b), contrasted, for its part, the “harsh reality” of travelers who had to isolate themselves for three days in a hotel room upon returning from vacations with the forced isolation of people in seniors’ homes, which had lasted for approximately 1 year at that time. Politicians who traveled during the pandemic despite public health instructions to avoid non-essential travels abroad and despite having exhorted their constituents to conform to lockdown regulations were particularly severely condemned by cartoonists and by the population (e.g., <https://torontosun.com/opinion/cartoons/tim-dolighan-cartoon-january-11-2021>). More than just the risk of COVID-19 represented by travelers, it was their moral standards that these editorial cartoons lampooned.

4.3. The moralization of health behaviors: blaming those who do not respect public health recommendations

The editorial cartoons captured another prominent discourse throughout the pandemic: the division between those who followed public health guidelines and those who did not. A total of 53 cartoons portrayed people who did not respect preventive measures, particularly physical distancing (21 cartoons) and restrictions on social gatherings (21 cartoons).

Editorial cartoons that criticized people for their non-respect of physical distancing depicted people in two main contexts: in parks or at the beaches in spring and summer 2020 and in bars following the reopening of non-essential services in most Canadian provinces in May 2020. More than half of these cartoons used depictions of the coronavirus, suggesting these people were facilitating the spread of the infection and prolonging the pandemic, as the editorial cartoon published in the *Toronto Sun* on August 2, 2020, illustrated (Fig. 6).

The term “covidiot”, used since the beginning of the pandemic, also appeared in some of the editorial cartoons regarding the non-respect of physical distancing and in several about the refusal to follow the precautionary measures against COVID-19 (e.g., <https://torontosun.com/o>

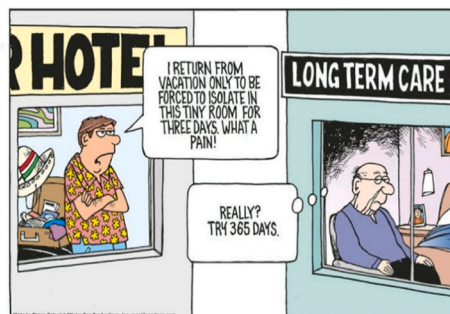


Fig. 5. a) Bruce MacKinnon, *The Chronicle Herald*, January 14, 2021. b) Adrian Raeside, 2021, “Pandemic travellers”, *The Times Colonist*, February 3, 2021, ©raesidecartoon.com.

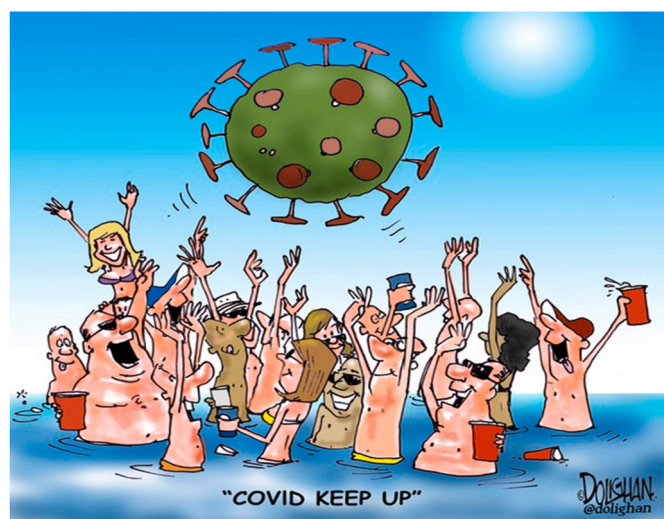


Fig. 6. Tim dolighan, *The Toronto Sun*, August 2, 2020.

pinion/cartoons/dolighan-cartoon-march-29). The neologism “covidiot” is the result of the combination of the two words “coronavirus” and “idiot”, and has become a popular term in Canada, both in French and English, to refer to people not following the preventive measures against COVID-19. Its opposite, “covidient”, is a combination of the terms “coronavirus” and “obedient.” Although the emphasis of the words “covidiot” and “covidient” is on the respect or non-respect of measures to prevent the transmission of COVID-19, the term “covidiot” also denotes a judgment on the level of intelligence of those who do not abide by the health authorities’ rules and advice. A similar judgement is illustrated in editorial cartoons about the refusal to follow of physical distancing. For example, an editorial cartoon published in the *Toronto Sun* on May 26, 2020, titled “10,000 defy social distance guidelines in Toronto ...” (<https://torontosun.com/opinion/cartoons/nease-cartoon-may-26>) showed people, depicted as dinosaurs, gathered in a public park. A meteorite-like virus threatens to fall on the park, an allusion to the main hypothesis for the cause of dinosaurs’ extinction but also a reference to the danger of the new coronavirus for humans. The choice of representing people as dinosaurs suggests the lack of evolution or the backwardness of people who do not respect physical distancing.

People who did not respect the restrictions on social gatherings were also condemned for their behavior in editorial cartoons. These editorial cartoons mainly depicted small private gatherings taking place inside people’s homes. If these cartoons showed the absurdity of some situations—people who developed elaborate schemes not to respect the restrictions, people who spied on and reported their neighbors who did not respect the rules, the police who intervened to enforce sanitary regulations (e.g., <https://www.journaldemontreal.com/2020/10/01/la-caricature-dygreck>)—they nevertheless illustrated the risks associated

with this practice. One editorial cartoon published in *The Victoria Times Colonist* on March 25, 2020, and titled “Irresponsible activities that could lead to the death of others”, for example, compared “ignoring the ban on public gatherings” to “manufacturing illicit drugs” and “drunk driving” (<https://www.timescolonist.com/opinion/adrian-raeside-cartoon-dangerous-gatherings-1.24105267>). Another editorial cartoon published in *Le Devoir* on April 3, 2020, and presented in Fig. 7a represented the Four Knights of the Apocalypse to whom a fifth was added. The fifth knight rides a donkey instead of a horse, an animal known in popular imaginary for its stupidity and stubbornness (“stupid as a donkey” and “stubborn as a mule”). The fifth knight held a placard noting “Happy hour tonight. Free beer. Come and join us!” (“5 à 7 ce soir. Bière gratuite. Venez nombreux!” in French). Through the use of the metaphors of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse and the donkey, this editorial cartoon suggested two things: the risk of death associated with gatherings in times of COVID-19 and the low level of intelligence and stubbornness of people who engaged in this type of behavior.

In a similar way to people who took vacations despite public health recommendations to avoid non-essential travels abroad, people who ignored the ban on social gatherings were also criticized for being self-centered and for lacking solidarity and concern for others. An editorial cartoon published in the *Toronto Star* on April 6, 2020, titled “Selfless, Selfish” and presented in Fig. 7b is eloquent. The cartoon showed the frontal plan of a residential building of nine apartments. In eight of them, the cartoonist illustrated people alone, respecting the restrictions on social gatherings, with the caption “selfless.” In the ninth apartment, the cartoonist depicted people gathered around a table enjoying a meal with the caption “selfish.” The respect of preventive measures against COVID-19 was thus deeply moralized in these editorial cartoons and those who did not abide by the rules were commonly labeled as “idiots” or “egocentrics.”

4.4. “Pandemic deniers”, “anti-maskers” and “anti-vaxxers”: portraying those who question or criticize the scientific discourses about COVID-19

Among the 203 editorial cartoons that we analyzed in this study, 53 negatively depicted people who opposed the scientific discourses about COVID-19. Notably 15 cartoons singled out people who did not believe in the existence of the pandemic, 21 criticized people who were opposed to mask wearing and 13 negatively pictured people who did not want to be vaccinated. Since these three groups of people were often portrayed side by side and in a similar way in editorial cartoons, they are presented together in this section.

Pandemic deniers, anti-maskers and people who refused vaccination against COVID-19 were most often depicted by cartoonists in Canadian editorial cartoons in the context of demonstrations against public health measures, waving placards and wearing t-shirts displaying messages for their cause. The editorial cartoon published in the *Toronto Sun* on April 22, 2020, and presented in Fig. 8 is a typical example. This cartoon showed a group of people demonstrating and questioning the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic or its magnitude with slogans such as “fake

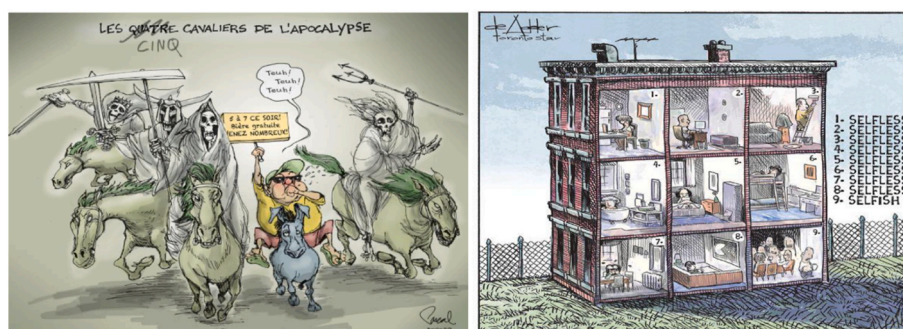


Fig. 7. a) Pascal Elie, *Le Devoir*, April 3, 2020. b) Michael de Adder, “Selfless, selfish”, *The Toronto Star*, April 6, 2020.

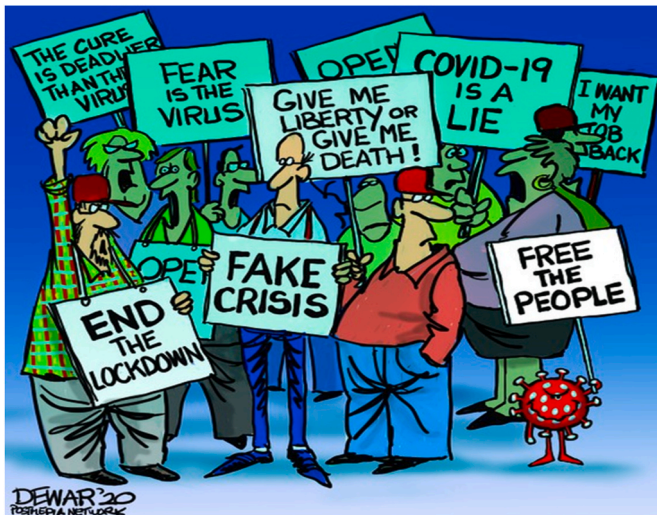


Fig. 8. Sue dewar, the *Toronto Sun*, April 22, 2020.

crisis” or “COVID-19 is a lie.” Other editorial cartoons that depicted pandemic deniers showed people saying that COVID-19 is “nothing” or “just a flu” (e.g., <https://www.journaldequebec.com/2020/09/08/la-caricature-dygreck>) or linking the health crisis to false information that have traveled around the globe, such as that electromagnetic waves from 5G cellular towers could transmit COVID-19, that Bill Gates caused the COVID-19 pandemic in order to control the whole world by implanting digital microchips in humans through vaccines, or that the dangers of the new coronavirus were exaggerated by a conspiracy of massive proportions to undermine Donald Trump’s authority and work to dismantle a network of cannibalistic, satanic and pedophilic elites (e.g., <https://www.journaldemontreal.com/2020/08/08/la-caricature-dygreck>). Editorial cartoons about anti-maskers drew on similar themes but also represented people denouncing the “tyranny” of the mask and claiming their right to “liberty”, while editorial cartoons about people who refused to be vaccinated depicted people saying that vaccines were “poison.”

Pandemic deniers, anti-maskers and people who refused to get vaccinated against COVID-19 were directly linked by cartoonists to the transmission of the infection as evidenced by the depiction of coronaviruses in most editorial cartoons. The cartoon in Fig. 8 showed people who did not believe in the existence of the pandemic or in its magnitude with a coronavirus in an anthropomorphic form with a malicious face holding a placard reading “Free the people”, suggesting its support to the pandemic deniers and its desire for the end of the precautionary measures to continue transmission to other people. An editorial cartoon published in the *Chronicle Herald* on December 16, 2020, showed the Grim Reaper riding a horse, on which we can read the words “anti-vaccine”, sowing viruses on its path. “Anti-vaxxers” were thus depicted as the vehicle for the spread of COVID-19 and, in a broader sense, for death (<https://www.saltwire.com/halifax/opinion/editorial-cartoons/michael-de-adder-cartoon-dec-16-2020-531515/>). Editorial cartoons that represented pandemic deniers, anti-maskers and people who refused to be vaccinated also criticized and blamed them for being responsible for the continuation of the pandemic. This was exceptionally well illustrated in the editorial cartoon published in *The Chronicle Herald* on December 11, 2020 (Fig. 9). This editorial cartoon represented a chain with a broken link that prevents recovery from the pandemic: the “anti-vaxxers.” People who refused to get vaccinated against COVID-19 were thus accused of being the “weak link” and an obstacle to the return to normality.

In a similar way to people who did not follow the public health precautionary measures against COVID-19, people who questioned or criticized the scientific discourses about the pandemic were also linked

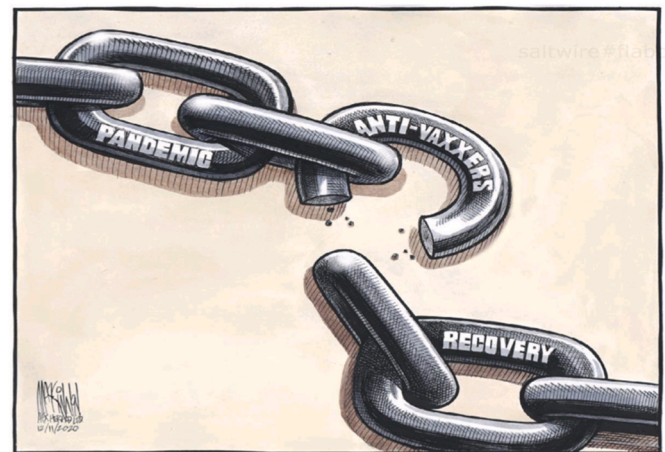


Fig. 9. Bruce MacKinnon, *The Chronicle Herald*, December 11, 2020.

to undesirable characteristics. They were first portrayed as silly, irrational or careless. The editorial cartoon published in the *Toronto Sun* on October 13, 2020, and presented in Fig. 10, for example, showed two aliens who, after meeting an anti-masker, concluded that they have not yet met any intelligent life forms on earth. An editorial cartoon published in *The Chronicle Herald* referred to the popular book and movie character “The Grinch.” In the book and the movie, the Grinch is known for having a very small heart. In the editorial cartoon, however, it was the brain of the Grinch that represented “anti-vaxxers” and was abnormally small (<https://www.saltwire.com/halifax/opinion/editorial-cartoons/michael-de-adder-cartoon-dec-14-2020-530743/>). Another editorial cartoon published in the same newspaper in July 2020 depicted a group of people opposed to mask wearing standing on the floor of the deep end of a swimming pool. The caption read “Completely off the deep end”, an idiom implying that people are irrational or behave in an extremely strange way (<https://www.saltwire.com/halifax/opinion/editorial-cartoons/michael-de-adder-cartoon-july-6-2020-469881/>). People who contested the scientific discourses about COVID-19 were also portrayed as self-centered. This was particularly noticeable in editorial cartoons in French newspapers, which depicted demonstrations including people wearing t-shirts with the caption “Me” (*Moi* in French) or “Me, Myself and I” (*Je, me, moi* in French) (e.g., <https://www.journaldequebec.com/2020/08/22/la-caricature-dygreck>), or who put side by side people who advocated on the streets for their rights not to wear a mask and seniors who were isolated in long-term care and

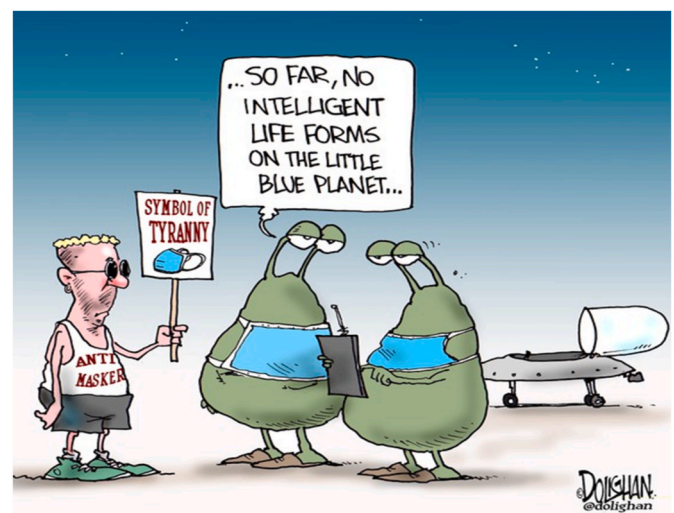


Fig. 10. Tim dolighan, *The Toronto Sun*, October 13, 2020.

housing centers because of the risk that the COVID-19 represented to their health and life (e.g., <https://www.journaldequebec.com/2020/09/08/la-caricature-dygreck>). These editorial cartoons thus not only blamed “science deniers” for spreading the virus, but also attributed highly undesirable characteristics to them such as irrationality, selfishness and idiocy, reinforcing thereby their portrayal as uninformed “moral deviants”.

5. Discussion

During the first months following the recording of the first cases of the virus in Canada, public discourses attributed blame for COVID-19 to people of Chinese origin or descent, to international travelers, to Americans, to Canadians from specific provinces (notably Quebec and Alberta) and to residents of cities. This is an “othering process” common in times of pandemic. In the face of danger, as Douglas (1992) writes, out-of-group people, especially national and geographic others, are commonly accused of being at fault. In addition to being held accountable for the origin and transmission of COVID-19, several of these groups were discredited and set apart—in other words stigmatized—because of their association with the disease. “Snowbirds” in many parts of Canada were coldly welcomed upon their return to the country at the onset of the pandemic (Cousineau, 2020), while people with out-of-province licence plates were often looked askance and insulted when visiting another province (Ward, 2020). People of Chinese origin and ethnicity, and Asian-“looking” people (e.g., Indigenous Canadians mistaken for people of Asian descent) more generally, however, suffered the brunt of the stigma associated with COVID-19. In news and in popular discourses, the culinary traditions of people of Chinese ascendance were commonly portrayed as “unhealthy” and “primitive” and as responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic. Some Canadians avoided Chinese and other Asian restaurants, and people of Chinese ethnicity reported incidence of hateful language and discriminatory behaviors towards them (Angus Reid Institute, 2021). While the stigmatization of Americans, Quebecers, travelers, city dwellers and so on may not last long—it is in fact already almost over with the increasing incidence of COVID-19 cases in all regions and communities—the stigmatization experienced by people of Chinese ethnicity may last longer as it follows longstanding patterns of racism within Canada.

If in the beginning of the pandemic responsibility for the origin and transmission of COVID-19 was mainly attributed to foreigners, travelers and city dwellers, blame attribution shifted later on, as we have seen in editorial cartoons, to people who did not follow recommended preventive measures, notably people who did not respect physical distancing and restrictions on social gatherings, and to people who questioned or criticized the scientific discourses about COVID-19. These people were portrayed in editorial cartoons as “immoral”, “silly” even “stupid”, and “self-centered”. Underlying the blaming of these individuals and groups, one can see the ethos of self-discipline and responsibility towards one’s health common in contemporary Euro-American societies (Greenhalgh and Wessely, 2004; Petersen and Lupton, 1996). Through this lens, maximizing health is of paramount importance; health is a goal to be achieved and worked for (Lupton, 1995). By extension, those who are unhealthy are considered responsible for their condition. Health thus becomes a metaphor for living a virtuous life (Lupton, 1994; Rozin, 1997). Blaming those who are “selfishly” not following recommended measures, as highlighted in Douglas’ work (1992), could also serve to promote collective response and solidarity against individualism in face of a common threat. Blaming of these individuals then reflects a discourse on sacrifice for the common good, typical of war-like situations. Political leaders have depicted the COVID-19 pandemic as an extreme situation requiring extreme measures. Every day during the first year of the pandemic, TV broadcasted number of deaths, infections, and recoveries. Metaphors of war were employed—we needed to *fight* and *win the battle* against the virus. In this context, identifying who (they) threatened (us) from within was seen as an essential binary. In Canada,

similar to what Casciano (2020) wrote about Italy, “the blame took the form of reprimands directed towards those who were not willing to sacrifice themselves as others did” (2020, p. E21): the undisciplined ones, “those who, hedonistically, only thought about themselves and did not care about others” (2020, p. E20). In fact, in our analysis of editorial cartoons in Canada, we observed a division of the population into two groups: on the one hand, the “virtuous”, “selfless” and “smart” people who respected the preventive measures; on the other hand, the “immoral”, “self-centered” and “silly” ones who did not respect the recommended measures to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. As Douglas (1992) writes, when danger is perceived as coming from within the group, blame is a common strategy to encourage non cooperative community members to follow the rules.

Interestingly, we did not observe major differences in groups of people blamed or stigmatized across cartoons from newspapers with diverse political positions or from different provinces. This shows, we believe, a broad national agreement on the interpretation of the pandemic. During the first and second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada, editorial cartoons were highly aligned with and reinforced public health discourses; all cartoons promoted adherence to recommended measures by negatively depicting those who were not doing so. Editorial cartoons reflect prevailing views, attitudes and values of the population and have goals that make readers think about current events and to provoke debates (Giarelli and Tulman, 2003). In the context of COVID-19, cartoonists in Canada contributed to strengthening dominant social ideas and perspectives about the pandemic and to enforcing social order and consensus.

The initial aim of our study was to explore issues of blame and stigma associated with COVID-19 in social media in Canada by analysing user comments on the social media account of 15 major Canadian newspapers. In the first six months of our data collection (planned for one year), we yielded over 2,484,717 comments about COVID-19. This huge corpus of data rendered our planned approach unfeasible and analyzing editorial cartoons proved to be better suited for in-depth qualitative analysis. Our findings must be interpreted as particular to time and place. Although we used different approaches to triangulate and ensure the trustworthiness of our data (i.e., dual-coding, validation of coding scheme within team members, dual checking of excluded cartoons), our study is not without limitations. Notably, we did not cross-check our interpretations with cartoonists. Also, in examining only mainstream news media, we were not able to capture extreme representations that might endanger liberal democracies in these increasingly uncertain times. It should also be mentioned that the corpus contains 1564 editorial cartoons and that only 203 of them were selected for the analysis on blame and stigmatization. The majority of cartoons were excluded from our analysis because they depicted broader aspects of the pandemic (politics, economics, health system, public health measures) and were portraying politicians and public health representatives, not “ordinary people”. This further limit generalization of our findings.

6. Conclusion

Our analysis revealed that different segments of the Canadian population were blamed in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. If, at the beginning, blame was mostly placed on geographic or cultural “others” (people of Chinese ethnicity, foreigners, travelers, city dwellers), it later shifted to people who were not following public health recommendations. While negatively portraying these individuals may help promote adherence to the recommended measures, it also can exacerbate polarization, especially considering discrimination based on ethnicity and age observed early in the pandemic.

In the current “infodemic”, characterized as an over-abundance of information and discourses (Purnat & al., 2021), analyzing editorial cartoons that capture and synthesize dominant feelings and perceptions at a given time and place can be a useful approach to rapidly gather information about current social, medical and health issues. Given the

profound impact of the infodemic on COVID vaccine acceptance (Loomba et al., 2021), for public health, program managers and developers, as well as political policy developers, editorial cartoons may be a useful tool to monitor the circulation of knowledge and current societal perceptions. More research is needed.

Credit author statement

Fabienne Labbé: Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft. Catherine Pelletier: Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft. Julie A Bettinger: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. Janet Curran: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. Janice E Graham: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. Devon Greyson: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. Noni E MacDonald: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. Samantha B Meyer: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. Audrey Steenbeck: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. Weiai Xu: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. Eve Dubé: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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